

# ARTFORUM

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## On the Road

JEFFREY WEISS ON LAND ART TODAY

LAND ART, whatever else it is, can be identified with a specific narrative of American space: the road trip. I draw this notion from *T.S.O.Y.W.*, a 2007 film by Amy Granat and Drew Heitzler included in the Whitney Biennial this past spring. Distantly related to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goethe's Romantic novella of longing and suicide (from which Granat and Heitzler's acronymic title is derived), *T.S.O.Y.W.* depicts the romance between a lost soul and his motorcycle. This remarkable film, which has no diegetic sound (its ambient, semi-improvisational electronic sound track was composed by Granat, Jutta Koether, and Stefan Tcherepnin), is presented as a continuous sequence of split-screen images; the two sides are often nearly identical, distinguished from one another by alterations of film speed, exposure, and slight lapses in narrative time. *T.S.O.Y.W.* is more than three hours long; bravely, the authors have permitted fully half of it to be taken up by the protagonist's desert journey, the long, flat highway unspooling beneath his wheels. By conventional narrative standards, the trip is uneventful, the film less travelogue than waking dream. But there are destinations, which appear like so many stations of the cross, marking steps toward the implied self-annihilation of the film's uneasy rider: Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, and Nancy Holt's *Sun*

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*Tunnels*, 1973–76, are lengthy stops on the trail; drive-by sites include Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*, 1977, and James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, 1972–.

It is hard to imagine a young artist now choosing to pursue the impossible dream of Land art. *T.S.O.Y.W.* is so peculiarly moving because it is almost inadvertently nostalgic: It implies that the legacy of Land art has more to do with romance than with any continuity of practice. In this, the archaeological dimension of the genre—according to which late modernists sought to engage the furthest reaches of precivilized culture as if

ancient sites could somehow be mistaken for an expanded field of personal aesthetic ambition—is now taken for granted, perhaps even redeployed. Generationally impervious to the lure of archaic mythology per se, Granat and Heitzler traffic instead in the quasi-mythical identity of the modern Earthwork as a remote—but now touristic—site of sublime-scale vision and labor.

The desire to escape the urban confines of making and selling art was one motivation behind the turn to the desert as a manifest destiny in artmaking during the 1960s and '70s. "The tools of art have too long been confined to 'the studio,'" Smithson wrote in these pages in 1968. "The city gives the illusion that earth does not exist." Well before longstanding Earthwork projects came to rely on grotesque levels of financial support—as some now have—this escape was understood to be a form of authenticity. That the authentic turns out to be a construction of sorts does not compromise the power of the best examples of Land art, such as *Lightning Field* and *Spiral Jetty*, which are largely devoid of hubris, representing instead the simple instrumentalization of the kind of flat, open space—and corresponding solitude—only the desert could once afford.

The most recent reconsideration of Land art—"Decoys, Complexes, and Triggers: Feminism and Land Art in the 1970s," an exhibition mounted this past summer at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, New York—demonstrated, however, that the genre is not, by any means, limited to the desert. Indeed, the show, an overview, was almost devoid of wilderness. Yet what is "landed" about Land art was not, in this setting, always clear: Concisely curated by Catherine Morris, "Decoys" included sculpture and installation projects that have little to do with non- or antiurban space, although many of the works do share a certain

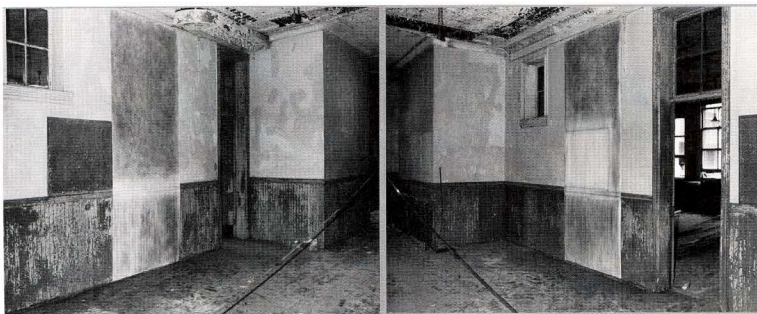


Amy Granat and Drew Heitzler, *T.S.O.Y.W.*, 2007, two-channel film in 16 mm transferred to video, 200 minutes. Production still. Photo: Amy Granat.

affiliation with materials, principles, and systems that were occasioned by artists' resistance to the confines of studio practice. What might be feminist overall about the art in question is also uncertain. The exhibition confined itself to the work of women: Alice Adams, Alice Aycock, Lynda Benglis, Agnes Denes, Jackie Ferrara, Suzanne Harris, Nancy Holt, Mary Miss, Michelle Stuart, and Jackie Winsor. But neither the selection nor the didactic texts accompanying the show (in the form of handouts and wall labels) made an overt argument for a polemically feminist account. Are we meant to see the work through a single, hegemonic notion of feminist ideology? The fact that a number of artists in the show (by the curator's own admission) reject that nomination presses us to take issue with what is in danger of seeming a merely rhetorical claim. To be sure, many of these artists are badly in need of greater visibility; yet redressing cases of neglect only barely qualifies as a feminist methodology. Nonetheless, absent a true polemic, the exhibition motivated us—while we remained within the gendered frame—to roam.

A good deal of the work at SculptureCenter was, of necessity, represented by photographs, drawings, and other documents, a problem—if we can call it that—which will attend any exhibition of works that exceed the frame of conventional space. In some cases, the photographic record is all we have: The most compelling example is Agnes Denes's perpetually astonishing





From top: Michelle Stuart, *East/West Wall Memory Relocated*, 1976, graphite. Installation view, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, New York. Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan with New York Financial Center*, 1982, documentary photograph.

*Wheatfield—A Confrontation*, represented here by color images of her project from 1982 (supported by the Public Art Fund), in which a field of grain was planted on prime real estate in Lower Manhattan. More a question of heartland prairie than extreme desert, *Wheatfield* may be—specifically in relation to urban planning—one of Land art's great transgressive masterpieces, not least because it has come and gone. Are plans and images works of art in themselves? Here the limitation of categories is at stake—the notion of Land art versus that of, say, Conceptual art. This suggests that the time has come for us to abandon the old nomenclature in order to examine a far less tidy but more absorbing historical narrative. But names of genres are stubborn things.

Jackie Winsor's early career is a case in point. The exhibition represented her devotedly, with a group of now-classic works that reference forms of basic labor and demotic materials: lath, brick, rope, cement. Still

other objects of this kind are pictured in early photographs, including a familiar “exploded” piece and an outdoor installation in Nova Scotia. Winsor's early sculpture, which looks better and better as time goes by—a conceptually focused yet bluntly material project—cannot be adequately accounted for by the Land art rubric alone. This is somewhat less true of Michelle Stuart, whose works in the show constituted a welcome rediscovery. The multiple panels of the *Sayerville Strata Quartet* from 1976—four twelve-by-five-foot suspended sheets finely encrusted with medium from four separate strata of earth—reconcile geo-

logic scale with the space of painting. Even so, photodocumentation of an equally important work in graphite for the very urban walls of New York's P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center (*East/West Wall Memory Relocated*, also from 1976) brings us back to wobbly nomenclature. Conversely, when Land art did matter in the exhibition, we often found ourselves confronting perhaps the tendency's least encouraging corollary: the rise of the sculpture garden and the art park, where work—in domestic captivity, so to speak—is often demoted to the status of garden folly. Perhaps Land art's best efforts, then, come instead in the form of ephemeral undertakings. In addition to *Wheatfield*, “Decoys” included *Cut-Off*, 1975, a short film by Mary Miss, which holds and haunts us more than her otherwise handsome, pavilion-like structures (one of which is also in the show): A team of men with shovels surreptitiously digs a trench in a rural field, using the dirt to fill a group of cylindrical bound-lath containers,

which are planted along the trench in a row. The film ends with a long shot of the completed project in place, a clearly temporary intervention that holds our attention in the manner of a crop circle.

*Cut-Off* enlists the space-dividing concept of the “cut,” one in a series of devices in new art of the period (including the work of De Maria, Carl Andre, and Richard Serra, along with several other examples in the recent show) that take the form of a long, straight line. All of these may finally trace back to *Composition 1960 #10 (to Bob Morris)* by La Monte Young—a simple instruction that reads: “Draw a straight line and follow it.” The cut brings us back to the space and time of the road. Land art cannot be truly represented at a museum or kunsthalle (and only barely so in a park or garden); this is practically tautological. That quality—Land art's radical refusal—subtends the uncollectibility of large-scale projects (if we are to distinguish proprietorship from the convention of the trophy acquisition). Today's question of the hour is that of ephemerality versus preservation (recently discussed in these pages by Jeffrey Kastner with specific reference to the possible encroachment of oil rigs in the vicinity of *Spiral Jetty* [“Entropy and the New Monument,” *Artforum*, April 2008]). As Earthworks come of age, their fate has begun to look contingent and fragile. Those who are charged with caring for the sites are rightly doing what they can to forestall change; but a true poetics of Land art—given the very nature of the medium—must at least contend with the conflict between an ethic of preservation and the entropic pull of nature and culture that belongs to the content of the work. In this setting, Granat and Heitzler are melancholic visionaries. Their wheels, like reels, turn in order to draw a straight line and follow it: Their line is the road, a figure for unbounded space and inexhaustible time. But as their bike moves forward, their eyes gaze, historically, back; *T.S.O.Y.W.* shows us that memory has become a chief element of the temporal condition of the Earthwork. The film's end is a running-down and out, a sudden shift from images of the infinite desert to scarred film leader, then, abruptly, to nothing at all. Forever turns out to be the ultimate conceit. □

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